

“Be Not Afraid”
Bishop John M. LeVoir’s Monthly Column
for The Prairie Catholic

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Pastoral planning in union with the Lord, who never disappoints – Part III

In my column in the February issue of *The Prairie Catholic*, I wrote about the need for parishioners in smaller parishes to begin to evaluate their future. In my March column, I addressed the larger parish that may be asked to accept a merger with a smaller parish. In both cases, the pastoral leaders and parishioners are asked to discuss the future of their parishes honestly, prayerfully, and charitably. The diocesan pastoral planning staff and I will be involved in these discussions as well. Above all, pastoral planning should be done in union with the Lord.

Pastoral planning will include the merging of some parishes. However, the merging of parishes is not necessarily negative. It is a sign that the people of the diocese are willing to make adjustments based on reality.

For example, if there were no Catholic church buildings in the diocese and we were to designate the places for parishes to be established, we certainly would not build churches in every one of the places in which they stand today. I also would guess that the number of church buildings would be a good deal less than the number that we now have. Looking at things from this vantage point, our task is to evaluate the status of our parishes and church buildings as they are today and to ask God to help us make adjustments so as to meet the needs of parishioners today and in the future.

At the same time that we evaluate our parishes, we should also be working for the renewal of the Catholic faith in our diocese. Renewal consists of revitalizing our own Catholic faith and of going forth to evangelize our brothers and sisters. We have much work of renewal to do right here at home.

For example, Pope John Paul II was speaking to us when he wrote: “There is a situation, particularly in countries with ancient Christian roots, and occasionally in the younger Churches as well, where entire groups of the baptized have lost a living sense of the faith, or even no longer consider themselves members of the Church, and live a life far removed from Christ and his Gospel. In this case what is needed is a ‘new evangelization’ or a ‘re-evangelization’” (“Redemptoris Missio,” no. 33).

The “Fourth Plan for Parishes” notes that the Diocese of New Ulm has lost over 10 percent of its Catholic population in the last decade while the population as a whole has remained stable. The percentage of registered parishioners in our parishes has also seen a significant decline during this period. At the same time, the number of people who are not affiliated with any religion has increased dramatically.

These statistics indicate that there are many in our diocese who used to be practicing Catholics but are no longer. They are in need of a re-evangelization, a reintroduction to the person of Jesus Christ and his gospel message. Who will make this reintroduction? The answer is us.

In Baptism, each of us was configured to Christ. In other words, by Baptism each of us becomes literally “another Christ.” This is our identity. As “other Christs,” we are sons and daughters of God the Father; we belong to the People of God. Like Christ, we are priests, prophets, and kings. The New Evangelization belongs to our prophetic role. Just as Christ’s mission as prophet was to evangelize, so our mission is to evangelize, to spread anew with joy the gospel message of Jesus Christ.

This is what Pope Francis reminds us of in “The Joy of the Gospel,” his first apostolic exhortation: “In virtue of their Baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples (cf. Mt 28:19). All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization” (no. 120).

About a month and a half ago, I was at a New Ulm Diocesan Council of Catholic Women board meeting. The women and I brainstormed a bit on how we would carry out the New Evangelization, or reintroduce Jesus to those who no longer practiced their Catholic faith.

They first said that we should pray for those who no longer practice the faith. We should do this each day. They also suggested simple ways to encourage people to become re-engaged in their faith. Simple things can be said, such as “How are you? I miss seeing you at Mass,” or, “Is there something that happened that prevents you from coming to Mass? Can I help?” or, “The parish is having a festival this spring. Would you like to help?”

Granted, it is risky to open a conversation with another about our faith, but it is what we are called to do as prophets. Remember the words that Our Lord spoke so many times: “Do not be afraid.” We gain courage when we count on the love of Jesus that was poured into our hearts at Baptism and is reinvigorated in the Eucharist.

Commenting on the attitude of someone filled with the love of Jesus and enthused about evangelizing, or sharing the Good News with his or her neighbor, Pope Francis writes: “Let us recover and deepen our enthusiasm, that ‘delightful and comforting joy of evangelizing, even when it is in tears that we must sow. ... And may the world of our time, which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive the Good News not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient, or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervor, who have first received the joy of Christ” (“The Joy of the Gospel,” no. 10).

When we are filled with the joy of the Gospel, we will attract those who have drifted away from the practice of their Catholic faith or who have lost hope. The New Evangelization will help our parishes to become more vibrant. Effective evangelization is capable of reversing the troublesome trends that are seen in our diocese. But as we evangelize, we must trust in the Lord. As Pope Francis said recently: “Trust in the Lord – let us entrust ourselves to the Lord! ... This is a gamble we must take: to entrust ourselves to him. And he never disappoints. Never, never!” (Homily, Jan. 20, 2014).